Speaking in Outlines: How to Organize Your Presentation

I have heard a number of not-so-great presentations that probably seemed brilliant to passersby who only heard small portions of them: the speaker was eloquent, a story within it was engaging, and some facts seemed interesting. The overall organization, though, was confusing and convoluted. What results from such a scenario is that the audience members each remember different fragments of the presentation—a funny story or a little-known fact—but they lose the bigger picture. The audience is entertained, but they are not necessarily led to the conclusion the presenter had wanted.

To ensure your audience understands the basic ideas of your presentation and can follow you to your conclusion, you need to organize your ideas. Clear structure is at the heart of a successful presentation. Your audience will not be able to remember long lists of unorganized facts and stories, but if you chunk your information into a few main points, listeners will have a much higher retention rate (Lindley, 1966).

Good organization won't just help your audience's memory; it will help yours as well. One of the great fears of presenters—especially of those without scripts, notes, and wordy PowerPoint slides—is that they will forget something. Think about it: if you tried to remember a long list of facts about a product to share with investors in a presentation, you might find the task difficult. If, however, you grouped your facts into three main points—the product's wide potential market, its profitability, and its uniqueness among competing products—you will be much more likely to remember the information. And even if you forgot a fact or two along the way, you still would have shared the three overarching reasons why your product is a smart bet for investors.

Just having a few main ideas, though, is not enough. The key to good organization is to **map your movement** throughout the presentation. In other words, you want to keep your audience informed of where the presentation has already been, where it currently is, and where it is headed, so that your listeners can follow along easily. This is not a thriller movie; there is no need for unexpected twists and turns. Likewise, this is not writing, in which you would try to make your transitional statements more artistic and subtle. Your organization when speaking ought to be overt and obvious; your audience doesn't get the opportunity to reread what you are saying. Therefore, you need to follow a clear structure and include conspicuous organizational cues throughout your presentation.

Start with Your Intent

Presenters often find their organization muddled when they try to tell their audience *everything* they know or have found in their research about their topic. This pitfall is quite fittingly known as the **data dump** (Weissman, 2009). Remember that audiences don't need to know *everything* there is to know about your topic; too much information will overload and overwhelm them, and they will therefore retain very little of it. Start by ensuring that your statement of intent (the I in AIMC) is focused on an achievable goal; then diligently adhere to that focus by *only* including the information that your audience needs to hear for you to reach that intent.

Basic Structure: Introduce, Prove, and Conclude

While the specific flow of your ideas will differ from presentation to presentation, most times, you should follow the same basic structure. This basic structure is commonly used in speaking and is most like the

organization you would use for a research paper; this means your audience will know it and be able to follow it easily. The three main components of that structure are as follows: (1) Introduction – introduce your audience to the basic point of the presentation; (2) Body – make and prove your main points; and (3) Conclusion – summarize and remind your audience what you covered. Ron Hoff (1992) alternatively puts it this way: (1) Tell them what you're going to tell them; (2) Tell them; and (3) Tell them what you just told them.

Let's look at each of these sections in more detail by considering your upcoming Introductory Presentation. As a note of caution, you will notice that I will write out sections of a sample presentation to help you understand each component of the organizational structure. This, however, is for illustrating purposes only; you should *not* be writing out the words you plan to say. Remember, this is *not* scriptwriting, so while you should follow the basic structure described below, the words you say can and should be different every time you practice or deliver the presentation.

Tell Them What You're Going to Tell Them: Orienting the Audience to the Ideas to Come

Just like in writing, the introduction's goal is to grab the audience's attention and orient them to the main topic. A solid beginning will include four steps: an attention-getter, a self-introduction, a thesis statement, and a preview:

1. **Grab attention**: A good introduction starts with a strong opening line. First impressions happen right away, so you want the first words out of your mouth to be something more substantial and captivating than, "So, um, hi. My name is Jane, and I'm here to discuss why I'd be a great team member." Instead, an interesting question, factoid, or anecdote could better set the scene:

   > Groupwork can really suck, can't it? Right? I know! I had a group for an English project in high school two years ago that I think has scarred me for life. They knew nothing about the topic. They contributed nothing to the group plan. They did nothing toward the project …well, at least not anything useful. Ever had that before? Well, guess what? They got As on that project. Why? Because they had me!

2. **Introduce yourself:** *After* you have captivated the audience's attention, you can give a self-introduction (your first and last name): "My name is Jane Smith" or "Hi! I'm Jane Smith." You might also need to tell the audience your credibility on the topic when that might be in question. For a presentation like the Introductory Presentation, a credibility statement is not needed, since you are the presumed expert on yourself.
3. **State your thesis:** The thesis is an upfront statement telling the audience the point of your presentation. It is similar to the statement of intent you have already crafted, but the thesis should be worded for the audience (whereas the statement of intent is worded for you for planning purposes). For this first presentation, "I would be a great addition to your future presentation team" would suffice.
4. **Preview main points:** The preview is essentially the agenda for the body of your presentation. You should list out all the main points you will cover *in the order in which you will cover them*, using pausing and numbering: "The two qualities that will make me a great teammate are that (1) I am willing to pick up others' slack [*pause*], and (2) I'm very organized in my project planning."

   The preview may seem like unnecessary filler, but I assure you it is not. Audiences like to know what's coming up before it happens. It helps to set the stage for what is to come, the

same way a meeting agenda would. The preview also clarifies how your ideas are related to one another. As an added bonus, if you forget mid-presentation which main point should come next, you can simply ask the audience: "What did I say I would talk about second? Oh, yes: my organizational skills. Thank you!"

It's important to note here that some of these sections can be combined into the same sentence. While you ought to cover each of these points in your introduction in order, they don't each need their own designated sentence. For instance, after the attention-getter, Jane could have said, "Hi, I'm Jane Smith, and I'm going to tell you why I'm the person you want to have on your next presentation team," which would have covered both her self-introduction and her thesis. How many sentences you use to complete the introduction doesn't really matter as long as you cover the points succinctly (don't start rambling off topic) and your tone is conversational. In other words, speak comfortably—follow the organizational structure, but do it conversationally.

After you've covered the four main sections of the introduction, you should have a clear, full-sentence transition into the first main point. After Jane's preview in which she said, "The two qualities that will make me a great teammate are that (1) I am willing to pick up others' slack [*pause*], and (2) I'm very organized in my project planning," she could then transition by saying something like "First, let me tell you about how I will pick up your slack if you fall behind." Keep in mind that transitions should be obvious and clear for your audience. While in writing, simple transitionary words suffice in moving the reader forward, in speaking, transitions should be their own sentences that only serve to transition the audience out of one section of the presentation and into the next. While it would feel clunky in writing to do this, your live audience who cannot rewind what you say will much appreciate it. If you're not sure if your transition is obvious enough, you can even feel free to tell your audience something as transparent as, "Let's move to my first main point, which is that I am willing to take on extra work for the team."

Tell Them: Filling the Body with Substance

The body is the part of the presentation in which you discuss each of your main points. Remember that it is better to go more in depth on a few main points than it is to brush over many. Be realistic in terms of what you can cover well in the time restraints you are given. You do *not* need to cover every facet of your topic, product, or plan; you only need to highlight what is most relevant and important for your audience to know. If they have questions beyond what you choose to share, they'll ask, and you can provide that information then.

Once you have decided on your main ideas, how you arrange them is up to you. For some main points, there may only be one logical order. For others, though, the order may not matter as much. If that's the case and you have at least three main points, put your strongest points first and last; your audience is most apt to remember what is said at the beginning (because of what's known as the **primacy** effect) and what is said at the end (the **recency effect**), so be sure to anchor the ends of your presentation with the "good stuff."

The internal organization of each main point will vary, but there is a basic guideline you should follow for all your points: **for every claim, there must be adequate support**. You do this by following five basic steps: make a claim, explain it, prove it, summarize, and transition:

1. **Make a claim:** This is your main point, said in a clear statement: "I am the kind of teammate who will work hard to get a project done, even if that means I have to take on more work than others." In writing, you may know this as the *topic sentence*.
2. **Explain it:** Give more detail on your claim in one or two sentences: "If our group can't come up with any good ideas, I will be the best brainstormer you've ever seen. If our groupmates don't pull their own weight, I will step in and get their work done. I want to do well in our projects, and I will do the work needed to do well."
3. **Prove it:** For your audience to accept and believe your claim, you need to provide specific proof to support it. Proof can come in many forms: statistics, research findings, stories, demonstrations, and audience activities are just a few types. The point here is to give your audience some tangible evidence that what you say is true. By the end of your main point, your audience should be able to say confidently that they believe what you have told them.

   In our Introductory Presentation, your proof should come in the form of specific stories that demonstrate the qualities you claim to have. You know the story is specific enough when you could theoretically start it with "One time…" So, in Jane's case, to prove that she is willing to take on more work than others, she could finish the story she began in her attention-getter:

   > So, I started telling you before about my horrific group from high-school English, about how they did nothing. So, we had just read Dante's *Inferno* in class, and our assignment was to write a group paper about how we envisioned the nine circles of hell, following terza rima (which is the rhyming style Dante used). Riveting stuff, I know. So, my group had three other members in it, and apparently none of them were capable of original thought. When we were coming up with the ideas, they had none. It was like pulling teeth just to get them to speak. So, basically, we went with my idea, which was to make it comical and put different cartoon characters in the circles of TV Hell. We made a plan to divide up the work and set some deadlines for us each getting our parts done. Of course, the deadline came, and I was the only one who did their part. Well, I was definitely frustrated with them, and I tried talking to them and telling them that I needed some help to get this done. *[pause]* Nothing. I tried saying please. *[pause]* Nothing. I basically begged and pleaded with them to just do *something*. *[pause]* Still nothing. So, I knew I had a choice: I could either sink with them and fail the project, or I could suck it up and just get it done on my own. And so that's what I did: I sucked it up and just did the work myself. It was a ton of work, because, you know, it was supposed to be a project for four people, but I'm really proud of the work I did, and my teacher was impressed with our final product. And, yeah, it was definitely frustrating that they got an A for essentially doing nothing, but ultimately I thought doing well on the project was more important than making sure they failed.

   As you can see from her story, Jane used specific details about the scenario she was in and the specific actions she took that demonstrated her claim.

   This step of providing specific proof is essential to building your case, and yet so many presenters skip over it. The proof is needed to make your arguments valid and logical. Jane just saying that she's "always the one to do the most work" or she's "never been a

slacker" isn't convincing on its own. To cynics like me, that just sounds like unsubstantiated fluff. If she couldn't come up with a specific story to prove that she was willing to pull the slack for her teammates, then her audience would likely question whether she has actually ever done that (or would be willing to do it in the future). Proofless claims simply will not suffice. Therefore, if you want to make a claim, but you can't prove it, then *don't make that claim*. Not only do baseless claims signal poor argumentation skills, but they are also unethical to include in what should be a fact-based presentation.

4. **Summarize:** At the end of your specific proof, summarize what you have just said: "So, that's the kind of teammate I am: I'm the one who will do what it takes to get the work done on our team." The summary serves two functions: (1) it helps to reiterate the takeaway message of that main point, and (2) it signals to the audience that you are ready to move on. In the case of the Introductory Presentation, you also need to ensure that it is clear how this skill relates to a future presentation team. In Jane's case, the connection is obvious, but if you were proving your creativity, for instance, it might require a quick connection: "So, when it comes to making PowerPoint pretty or coming up with unique ideas, my creativity will definitely be an asset for a future presentation team."
5. **Transition:** While the summary is the signal that you are about to move on, the transition is when you actually move on. This is a full sentence that makes it abundantly clear where you just were in the presentation and where you are headed next: "Now that I've told you how I'm willing to work hard for our future team, let me tell you about how my project-planning skills will help us stay organized." You should include a transition between each main point.

Bad, Better, Best – Transition Statement		
Bad	"So, project-planning skills."	*That doesn't tell us that movement is happening in the presentation. If the transition is too short, your audience might not realize you've moved on and may therefore be confused how this new information relates to what you've already said.*
Better	"Second, I will tell you about my project-planning skills."	*This clues the audience into the upcoming movement to a new point, but it doesn't clearly connect to the previous point.*
Best	"Now that you hopefully see that I'm a hard worker who's willing to pick up the slack for our team, let's move on so I can show you how my project-planning will help to keep the work we do top-notch."	*This transition (as well as the good example listed in the text) says where you just were as well as where you are headed next in its own sentence. This makes the movement clear to the audience and helps to connect your main points to the thesis.*

Figure 1. Three versions of a transition*. Aim to make yours like the "Best" option.*

Tell Them What You Just Told Them: Ending Your Presentation with Impact

Once you have made your claims and proven them, you can wrap up your presentation. The conclusion is the shortest part of the presentation, and only includes three quick steps:

1. **Review:** This is the ending equivalent of the preview. Simply restate the main points you made in the order you made them; no extra explanation is needed: "So, today I told you that (1) I am willing to work hard for my team, and (2) I'm an organized project planner."

2. **Restate thesis:** Reiterate what the purpose of this whole presentation was: "Hopefully you agree that these two traits would make me a great teammate for a future presentation team." If you want to reverse the review and the restatement of the thesis, that's perfectly fine: "Today I told you about how I'd be a great future teammate for a group presentation for two reasons: (1) I'm willing to work hard for my team, and (2) I'm an organized project planner."
3. **End with clincher:** A clincher is a definitive ending that drives home the final point (the "take-home" message for your listeners) and signals to your audience that the presentation is done, and that they can now begin their thunderous round of applause. Consider this ending: "So, if you want to avoid group members like the ones from my high-school English class, I'm the partner for you. I can't wait to work with you!" Isn't that so much better than the awkward, "And, um, yeah…So, that's it!" that ends far too many presentations?

No Scripts or Pseudo-Scripts Allowed: How to Use an Outline Effectively

It is crucial to note that while I have given you a clear outline to follow, you should not use this as an excuse to write out detailed plans of what you will say in each section. *Resist the urge to write a pseudo-script.*

Planning out the words you want to say will make you sound too formal and over-rehearsed. Presentations should sound like *talking*, not like *reading* or *reciting.* If you write out a list of facts and commit them to memory, you will sound too robotic when you give the presentation. You are supposed to have some expertise on your topic (and you should unequivocally be the expert on yourself!); delivering a prewritten speech hurts the audience's perception of your credibility. Particularly in a case like the Introductory Presentation where you are selling your skills to the audience, an inability to talk about them without memorization certainly makes it seem like your evidence and stories are manufactured.

Moreover, planning your presentation to excruciating detail will bar you from being able to adapt effectively to your audience. Your presentation should not be a one-way transmission in which you unilaterally send a message to your audience. This is supposed to be a two-way street—a *conversation* between you and your audience. You have to leave a lot of wiggle room in your presentation plan to account for that audience interaction.

So, here's the big question: how do you plan out the presentation if you can't write it all down? You jot down *really short* phrases to remind yourself of the points you want to make on a basic presentation outline. Only put notes where you need them; don't add anything extra (like your name next to "self-introduction") or you will start to head down the dangerous path of scriptwriting and memorization. The actual wording of phrases shouldn't be on the outline. You're the expert; the information should be in your head, and you should be able to chat with your audience about it. Moreover, you don't want too many notes on the outline—even if they don't script out what you would say—because it makes it too hard to practice later. If you have to keep pausing to read all your notes to yourself, you won't be able to establish a natural flow to your presentation.

Look at the outline pictured below. This illustration represents how many notes you should need to help you organize and prepare your presentation. (Please note: you will *NOT* use this outline to present. It is for *preparation and the first stages of practice only*!)

This very basic outline can serve as your blueprint to ensure your presentation flows well and makes sense. Talk through the presentation a few times while looking at this bare-bones outline. You will undoubtedly say your message differently each time, but this is a good sign: it means you are able just to *talk* about the topic with your audience rather than recite a lecture on it.

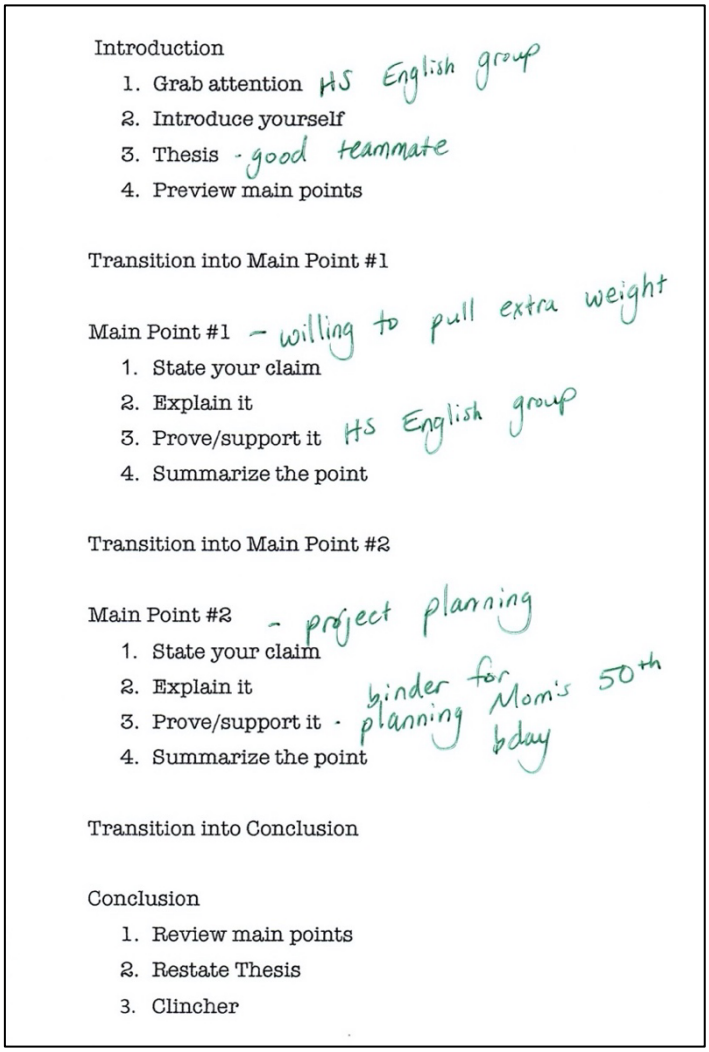
Introduction
1. Grab attention HS English group
2. Introduce yourself
3. Thesis - good teammate
4. Preview main points
Transition into Main Point #1
Main Point #1 – willing to pull extra weight
1. State your claim
2. Explain it
3. Prove/support it HS English group
4. Summarize the point
Transition into Main Point #2
Main Point #2 - project planning
1. State your claim
2. Explain it
3. Prove/support it - binder for planning Mom's 50th bday
4. Summarize the point
Transition into Conclusion
Conclusion
1. Review main points
2. Restate Thesis
3. Clincher

Figure 2. The amount of notes you should have on your outline for planning and practicing purposes. No scripts or pseudo-scripts allowed!

Get It in Your Head: Learning to Talk in Outlines

In addition to practicing the specific content of your next presentation, you should also practice speaking about *random* topics in an organized way. Here's a fun activity (well, at least I think it sounds fun): give yourself a nonsense topic to talk about in an impromptu presentation. *Without preparing what you will say*, look at the outline on this page (ignoring the green notes), and talk your way through each step. The goal is not to come up with brilliant content, but rather to follow all the organizational steps and clearly map your movement throughout. It's the organizational cues that matter in this exercise.

Let's say your topic is the alphabet, and your main points are A and Z. Use the outline in Figure 2 to try to get thorough an entire presentation following the steps. Start with your attention-getter: "A-B-C. It's easy as 1-2-3. As simple as Do-Re-Mi, A-B-C, 1-2-3, baby, you and me, girl" (Gordy, Perren, Mizell, & Richards, 1970) and move through each remaining step of the outline. Here is a sample of what you could say after your musical first line through the first main point:

- Self-introduction – *My name is Jane Doe…*
- Thesis – *and today we are going to explore the starting and ending letters of the alphabet.*
- Preview – *We'll start first with A, [pause] and then we will discuss Z.*
- Transition – *But first, let's start at the beginning of the alphabet with A.*
- Make a claim – *A is a vowel that can make two different sounds.*
- Explain it – *It can make a long sound—AY—or it can make a short sound—AH.*
- Proof – *There are many words that start with the long A: ape, angry, and age are just a few. There are also many words that start with the short A, like apple, alligator, and astronaut.*
- Summarize – *These two sounds and all of the words they start make the letter A a great first letter.*

- Transition – *Now that we have discussed the amazing letter A, let's move on to that alphabet-ending zany letter Z.*

You'll notice that this is not the most eloquent or cleverly worded example, but that's okay; impromptu presentations rarely are. The point of this exercise is to drill the *organization* into your head, not the presentation content. The more you practice talking in an organized manner, the more it will become second nature to you.

Learning to "talk in outlines" will be a tremendous benefit to you as a communicator. If someone asks you a two-part question, you will be quick to answer with, "I hear this as a two-part question. Let me start with your first concern about the cost, and then I'll address the availability" (a heck of a preview!) or after you finish the answer, you'll say, "Now that I've addressed cost and availability, what questions do you have about any other facet of our product?" (a stellar transition!).

Good presenters can speak in an organized manner, whether or not they've had time to prepare their content. They nonchalantly talk in lists, smoothly include transitions, and provide frequent summaries without having to remind themselves to do it; organization just seems to come to them naturally. Well, it doesn't come naturally; it comes from lots of practice.

I know the idea of practicing how to "speak in outlines" may seem silly, but this is an incredibly valuable skill to have. If you want to be understood easily when you present—or even just talk— learning to speak in a highly organized fashion will be a large leap in that direction.

Organizational Cues: Tips for Mapping Your Movement

Throughout the entire organizational structure, there are other tips that you can follow to help map your movement for your audience:

- **Use extra summaries.** It's helpful to end each main point with a summary, as was already mentioned, but it's also helpful to include summaries whenever you have finished a long explanation. Let's say Jane's story about project planning had to do with planning her mother's surprise 50th birthday party, and, in that story, she needed to explain just how much her mother was suspicious of what Jane was doing. If that explanation took a little while, Jane would be wise to end it with a summary before moving the story forward: "So, basically, I was doing all of this planning with my mother hovering over my shoulder trying to figure what I was up to. That's working under pressure, people!" Doing this would ensure that Jane's listeners understood the "moral of the story" before Jane moved on.
- **Use extra transitions.** Major transitions are worked into the basic organizational structure already described, but transitions between minor points are also helpful. So, in Jane's story, she might say something like, "Now that you can fully understand just how much pressure I was under to plan this party, let me just tell how many things I had to get accomplished."
- **Use lists.** When you can, chunk information into lists, and then number off each point for your audience. Lists not only help to organize information neatly and succinctly for your audience, but they also help to alert them that something important is coming. They additionally help *you* to keep track of whether you've covered all that you wanted to say. If you know you want to tell your audience about three benefits of a product, counting each of those benefits off as you speak will assure you covered all three.

- **Pause appropriately.** Sometimes all the right verbal cues get lost on an audience when the presenter races through the presentation at warp speed. To make previews, reviews, transitions, and lists effective, you need to pause a little before or after you say them so that they stand out to your audience.

Organize with Your Audience in Mind

As with every aspect of your presentation, your audience should be in the forefront of your mind when planning your organization. When you've successfully figured out your organizational structure, talk through each section of your outline and critically think to yourself, "Does my audience need to know this? Does this appeal to them? Will they care?" If the answer is "no" to any of these questions, adjust your content or approach and try again.

Not only should you include the type of content that will appeal most to your listeners, but you should also ensure that your organizational structure allows room for you to engage directly with the audience. Don't cram so much into the outline that you have no time for talkback and interaction. If you don't readily converse with your audience when presenting, then consider more carefully how you can work it in. When can you ask them questions, get their feedback, have them participate, or get them otherwise involved? Jot down a quick note to remind yourself on the organizational structure and plan for it in your time.

The key takeaway of this chapter is that *organization is important—to you and to your audience*. When you are asked not to write a script, it is tempting just to talk freely and abandon organizational conventions. If your presentation's structure is lacking, though, so too will your audience's understanding. Keep practicing aloud with the organizational structure provided so that previews, summaries, transitions, and reviews will come easily to you as you speak. Being able to talk clearly in a well-ordered fashion will serve you well in presentations and in all areas of your communication moving forward.

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